

Corps criticized over changing plans

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The Army Corps of Engineers' reluctance to identify a preferred alternative on how the Missouri River should be managed is government at its worst, says a spokesman for a national river watchdog group.

"Just 10 days ago they were saying in the media that they were going to come out with a preferred alternative to help meet obligations under the Endangered Species Act," said Chad Smith, with American Rivers. "Now they have decided to basically do nothing."

The corps announced Thursday to release a revised draft of the Missouri River's master manual, which will include a range of alternative water control plans.

"We have come to a very important point in the review and update process for the Missouri River Master Manual," said Brig. Gen. Carl Strock, with the corps. "We feel it is important to present more than one plan and to receive comments from the people affected by the proposed changes."

A public comment period will follow the release, to allow Missouri River stakeholders to hear the plans and make comments.

Smith said the corps simply bent to the wills of the downstream barge industry, rather than scientific evidence that supports change needed to safeguard endangered species such as the pallid sturgeon.

"We have to change the way the river is managed or we are going have some species go extinct," he said. "The corps has said they agree with the science, but then turn around and do nothing. It's all about politics, I guess."

Mike Olson, Missouri River coordinator for the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service in Bismarck, said groups have been working for more than a decade to get the corps to change the way it manages Missouri River flows, and

Thursday's announcement does nothing to move that process along.

"They have released revised drafts on this before -- this is the fifth one, the fifth time we have been at this step," Olson said. "I think it is fair to say that we are disappointed because they have not identified a preferred alternative."

Strock said the corps' ultimate goal is to select a water control plan that:

- n Meets the contemporary needs of the Missouri River basin as defined by the people of the basin.

- n Serves the authorized purposes of the river system.

- n Does not jeopardize the continued existence of fish and birds listed for protection under the Endangered Species Act.

No matter which alternative is dubbed preferred, not all groups will be in favor and intense discussions will follow, Olson said. Still, it's better to get them underway now, instead of later.

"We've told the corps that the current plan jeopardizes the continued existence of least terns, piping plovers and pallid sturgeon," he said. "It would be better to begin those discussions now because some species, especially the pallid sturgeon, can't wait."

One of the possible changes would release warm water over the spillway at Fort Peck Dam in Montana in hopes of triggering the pallid sturgeon to spawn. These ancient fish, nosing closer and closer to extinction, haven't spawned successfully in the river for decades, scientists have said.

"They have mountains of evidence and scientific data and they choose to ignore it," Smith said. "For them not to choose a preferred alternative is a pretty sudden change in events."